

[Letter from Alan Lomax to John A. Lomax; Port Aransas, TX]

January 21, 1939

Mr. John A. Lomax Port Aransas, Texas

Dear Father:

The "Fiddler-crab Song" was delightful according to Bess, Elizabeth, myself, Doctor Spivacke, Mr. Waters, Miss Rogers, Miss Andrews, and all and sundry who have seen it. That you have not received acknowledgment is due, first, to the coldness of heart induced by the climate and the tempo of life in these parts, and second, to straight ingratitude. Try to forgive us all collectively.

I bought Bess for Christmas a large camel's hair coat costing about \$39.00, and had to spend the rest of the money on Library business. When I get paid back I shall buy myself a \$21.00 Christmas present in kind memory.

I was as astonished as you were to find the American Ballads and Folksongs in the "Oxford Book of Light Verse." Also, to hear that two of our songs were in Marc Connolly's recent flop "Everywhere I roam" without acknowledgement. Also to learn that our version, word for word, of Jessie James was used in "Missouri Territory", another Broadway production.

One more word about Bess. She is already something of a leader on the Bryn Mawr campus, because of her charm, earnestness and intelligence. She is very happy there and is growing in every sort of way, probably too fast to be able to write about it well.

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I can't find the copy of American Ballads and Folk-songs you mentioned in your letter of the 15th, but I have talked the matter of revision of the music over with Spivacke, Waters and Mr. Seeger. They all feel that extensive correction of Mary Gresham's work has to be done, and do not feel that Mr. Strunk's correction would be sufficient. A number of the songs will have to be corrected directly from the records, and it seems best to have one person do most of the job.

A little more about the machine — Doctor Spivacke is anxious to find out how long a trip you want to make, so that he may make out the necessary request for mileage and per diem. The machine will be ready a month from now, probably, depending on what condition the Detroit thieves left it in. We need some good acetate recordings of work-songs for possible inclusion in the suggested album for Pan-American republics, etc., and I suggest that you go by Huntsville, Darrington, and the other prison farms in Texas and Arkansas, and stay as long as you can and get bang-up recordings of group work-songs, also as many blues with guitar accompaniment as possible. We have made one fairly serious mistake all along, and that is not repeating songs until really good 2 recordings were made in all cases. The disks and needles you will be using this time are going to make a lot of difference in the quality of the records you can make.

I have one town in Kentucky which I suggest you visit — Salyersville, about a hundred miles south of Ashland. The best banjo player I ever heard and one of the best mountain singers lives there. His name is Walter Williams. Another singer there of great interest is Clay Walters. I can give you other names if you decide to go. It seems a great shame not to keep closely in touch with such a remarkable person as Roscoe MacLean, and not to make some additional recordings of his voice. On your way through Louisiana, if you come that way, why not try to run down the story of the Batson affair. It is one of the most interesting of American ballads and about which even Gordon has practically no information. I can give you some good names in New Orleans, too, of early jazz musicians who know folksongs and jazz tunes which were not written down. Elizabeth's uncle lives in

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a little town in the no-man's-land on the Texas edge of Louisiana. Elizabeth says that he has a natural amateur's interest in folksongs and knows all the fiddlers and singers of that section, and he could probably lead you to very good material. All of which, in addition to contacts you have, sounds like a good month and a half of work. I hope you can arrange this trip to stay in prison camps longer than you have hitherto been able, and don't forget Bowlegs, for Heaven's sake, he is one of the great and when he gets out of Parchman will be lost to us forever.

About the great Lake songs, I know Mr. Walton quite well and last summer recorded a number of his songs in Michigan. I think I can get permission for us to use four or five of them and I shall pick these out in the process of looking at the records.

Mrs. Seeger and I are going to spend all this afternoon and as much time as we can get to in the next few days on the ballad book.

Please let me know as soon as you can about the loan.

Love,

AL a

P. S. I shall get copyright on the two cowboy songs looked up this afternoon.